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Historical context of the Westerbork Film from an international perspective

Professor Dr. Rob van der Laarse

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In the essay below, Professor dr. Rob van der Laarse¹ explains the international historical context of the Westerbork film, answering the question:

“How should the Westerbork film be contextualized in order to be presented to an international audience?”²

I guess the importance of the Westerbork footage can actually only be really understood from an international context. For the Camp Westerbork memorial center has not only recently received its European heritage label because of its functioning as a memorial site; Westerbork also exists outside this specific location as a collective memory among Jewish survivor communities all over the world, and in the archives in the Netherlands, Germany, Israel, the United States and elsewhere. As a unique, authored heritage of the Jewish persecution, the value and meaning of the so-called Westerbork movie is in my opinion closely related to the unique documentation of this Holocaust site, which for an international audience might be contextualised by the following aspects:

First, it is important from an international perspective - and considering the present refugee crisis - that the Holocaust did not start from scratch. The former Durchgangslager Westerbork demonstrates a unique transformation from a German-Jewish refugee camp into a Nazi-German transit camp in the Netherlands close to the German border. After Hitler's rise to power many German and Austrian Jews, such as the Frank family, were welcomed in the Netherlands. Yet after the 1938 Reichskristallnacht the Netherlands' government tried to slow-down the German-Jewish immigration by the building of guarded refugee camps, of which the inmates were concentrated one year later in the 'central' Jewish refugee camp Westerbork. Yet that in 1941 the Nazis took over command and turned it into a transit camp, might explain why for many people, the radical change from one camp into another, from a camp for foreigners into a camp for people made into foreigners, was hardly recognised. From the outside almost nothing changed, except the construction of a railway and some watchtowers, and the inside story was unknown to anyone, including the Dutch Jews.

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² E-mail with request for more information from Athina Gkouma (*Communication and Information Sector MOW/CI 7*) to Rob van der Laarse, Tuesday 6 December 2016

Secondly, the so-called Westerbork movie is a unique testimony of the Holocaust as depicting the 1944 daily life of a Nazi German concentration camp from an insider's perspective. Although ordered by the camp commander Konrad Gemmeker, it is shot by the German-Jewish photographer and filmmaker Rudolf Breslauer according to a script of his fellow inmate, the journalist Heinsz Todtmann, and therefore unmistakably of (German-)Jewish authorship. Even though the (probably) unfinished film was meant for propaganda, the 90 minutes footage offers today the only contemporary visual testimony of a Holocaust camp scape. Filmed by an experienced Jewish filmmaker the also still existing (!) script offered enough space to go beyond the staged appearance of the few other, comparable propaganda movies, such as Kurt Gerron's Theresiënstadt. Actually the making of this 'camp-town' movie had a lot in common with the Westerbork movie. For not only had Gerron lived as a refugee actor and filmmaker in the late 1930s in the Netherlands, he also had been a Westerbork inmate (and a member of the cabaret) before being deported in February 1944 with his wife as 'privileged Jews' to Theresienstadt. The SS ordered film of the Czech 'show camp' for which he was attracted as the director, might also have had the same intention as the Westerbork movie: to mislead the outside world about the condition and destiny of the Jews. And in contrast to the somewhat naive thought in Dutch literature that the film was Gemmeker's personal initiative (to let the Nazi high command in Berlin believe in Westerbork's potential role as a forced labor camp which would have saved him from being transferred to the Eastern front), both films show a comparable wish to depict the façade of a quiet, healthy Jewish camp life. Yet Gerron worked with a script made by the Nazis, who did not allow him to assemble and edit the footage, like Breslauer was allowed to by Gemmeker in Westerbork (even though both men would be lost their special status in Fall 1944, and sent by their protectors to Auschwitz). This distinguished the Westerbork footage, in my view, also from the earlier 1942 unfinished Nazi film about the Warsaw ghetto, of which the reels are known as "The Ghetto" and stored for decades in an Eastern German archive. Also of these only some horrifying stills were known, like those of a starving child on the street (with the Jewish ghetto police forcing people to walk through), before being recently re-edited into Yael Hersonski's A film unfinished: The Warsaw Ghetto as Seen through Nazi eyes. The Westerbork footage is unique, however, right because the camp is seen through Jewish eyes. For whatever the intention of the camp commander, the reels taken from March-May 1944 offer us the existing copies of the (lost) raw material which had never been handed over to the Nazis. Even though it is unknown what happened to the originals, what we have are copies assembled and re-edited directly after the war by one of Breslauer's own surviving team members.

Thirdly, the Westerbork movie, although lying about the intention of the camp, is one of the best authentic documentaries of the process of the Holocaust. Although the relatively peaceful images of the 1944 transit camp are not comparable to the brutality of the earlier Nazi ghetto footage, nor to the 1944-1945 allied films made during the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps, the Westerbork film is unique for showing us first hand "evidence" of the 'civilised' Western European persecution of the Jews. The incredible impact of Breslauer's film footage is most strongly related to various shots (in different qualities) of the trains arriving at the Westerbork Rampe from the SS camp Vught ('s Hertogenbosch) and departing from this same

platform to the extermination camp Auschwitz-Birkenau. As far as we know, these are the only stills of Jewish transports made from a Nazi concentration camp, and actually the whole meaning of the Holocaust, of transport and deportation, comes together in these crucial moving images. Precisely because the so-called Westerbork movie is a 1945 remake of the copies of Breslauer's original footage by one of his former assistants, by using all kind of material that would have never been allowed for the intended movie (as ordered by the SS commander), it offers us much more information on the daily life in a concentration camp than any other source, though with the exception of the camp diaries of the Westerbork inmates Philip Mechanicus and Etty Hillesum. Interestingly Mechanicus' descriptions of camp life were already combined with some Westerbork stills in the 1964 Dutch TV documentary *In Depot* (1964) by the Jewish historian Jacques Presser. One year later his academic publication *De ondergang* (1965; Engl. Ed. *Ashes in the Wind*, 1988) would become a milestone in Dutch Holocaust historiography. This is important to mention, as despite its impact on Dutch Holocaust historiography, Breslauer's movie seems to have been still unknown to later international scholars such as Hillberg and Friedländer. And yet, the Westerbork footage was used already in the Neurenberg trials as well as in Gemmeker's trial (1949) in the Netherlands, whereas stills of the transports have been used in many postwar Holocaust movies, such as in Alain Resnais' *Nuit et Brouillard* (1956, *Night and Fog*).

Fourthly, apart from the extermination of the Jews, the international importance of the Westerbork movie is nowadays also related to its depicting of what might be called Holocaust dissonances, such as for instance the Roma Holocaust. Kept in Dutch archives, the Westerbork footage was hardly known up to the 1990s, but, as said, stills were used since the Neurenberg trials, in movies, and in the Dutch 1960s TV series *De Bezetting of the Jewish 'national'* historian Lou de Jong (also the director of the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation) which made a huge impression on Dutch audiences who never had seen anything like this before. Like in the case of the Warsaw ghetto footage, some of these stills became widely known, such as the image of the young girl looking through the closing doors of a cattle wagon departing to Auschwitz on 16 May 1944. In addition to Anne Frank, 'the girl from Westerbork' or 'the girl with the headscarf' was an important Dutch icon of the Jewish persecution, until researchers in 1994 discovered her Sinti name Settela Steinbach – an icon appropriated by the wrong victims, and one Holocaust competed by another.

A comparable dissonant aspect of the Westerbork movie is the role of the 'Green' Jewish camp police. Like the Warsaw ghetto police also in Westerbork Jewish inmates, mostly from the German speaking 'old inmates', were appointed as internal camp guards, and these Jewish OD (*Ordnungsdienst*) was sometimes also involved in the persecution of Jews (such as the transports of inmates from the Jewish orphan houses). From an international perspective this questions the common dichotomy of victims and perpetrators. The film footage shows 'collaborating' Jewish policemen in their green overalls marching as *Fliegende Kolonnen*, and loading even sick people into the train to Auschwitz, after which they lock the doors. The active role of Jewish policemen was however long silenced, and has only recently been given more attention in new research on camp letters and diaries. For not only did the Dutch police and fascist *Waffen SS*- members play an important role in pogroms, Jew hunting and the outer

guarding of Westerbork, the internal guarding of the camp was completely Jewish. It clearly demonstrates the privileged role of what Abel Herzberg already in his *Kroniek der Jodenvervolging* (1950) named 'the Jewish nobility', with Arthur Pisk, head of the OD or 'Jewish SS', and Oberdienstleiter Kurt Schlesinger as Jews worse than the Nazis.

A last, and most important, dissonance of the Westerbork movie is the Nazi façade of Westerbork as a 'normal' labour camp in the old Dutch reclamation area (where work camps like Veenhuizen were introduced to civilise the urban poor already in the early 19th century). Together with the very effective organisation of the persecution of the Jews in the Netherlands as copied from the Polish model (of a Jewish Council together with the ghetto and camp system), this too may explain for a large part the lack of resistance among the urban Jewish camp inhabitants. Actually the Westerbork movie creates a false image of the Holocaust in the Netherlands if only because of the time of its creation. For it was during the first 1942-43 phase of the Holocaust when most of the labouring poor were sent from Jewish work camps to the Nazi extermination camps in Poland, organised via Westerbork by the first brutal camp commanders Deppner and Dischner. Gemmeker, the third SS commander, represented in contrast, the second phase of the Holocaust when the Jewish upper class was 'smiled' into the trains for having a good time in the East. This was the camp as depicted in the Westerbork movie, beautified like a show camp at the same time as Theresienstadt, in which daily life, just like the trains, seemed orderly organised around collective work on industrial orders and 'healthy' farm labour, while the inmates enjoyed sports, cabaret and revues, and went to synagogue and protestant services (for Christianised Jews in mixed marriages). Even sick people were cured in the largest hospital of the Netherlands under the personal eye of the commander, before putting them on the list for the weekly transports to the extermination camps. Yet what the Westerbork movie shows is actually not like Gerron's Theresienstadt a reality staged for propaganda to the outside world, but a camouflaged camp on behalf of the Jews themselves! It is this aspect of the film footage which makes it such an important visual document of the Holocaust. For it was exactly this Nazi façade which relates Westerbork's revue directly to Sobibor's 'Himmelfarbstrasse', actually the last walk for more than 33.000 Dutch Jews to the gas chambers in a building disguised as a Jewish bath house. Watching the Westerbork movie might give an international audience an unexpected, unwanted answer to the probably the most posed question: why did the Jews followed the German orders and not revolt or escape? Actually the orders were given in German by fellow Jews, and nothing, absolutely nothing, pointed into the direction of a brutal killing machine working on full speed only 72 hours away from Westerbork in Sobibor or Auschwitz-Birkenau.

And finally, this brings me to an element in the Westerbork movie which goes beyond the victim-perpetrator dichotomy and addresser ourselves, watching what happened in an unwanted role as bystanders. For watching the movie with our knowledge now of what happened then, with all those people in the barracks, work sheds and in the trains waiting to be removed to the extermination camps in the East, is a disturbing experience. It poses logistic questions on our still existing 'concentrationary' mindset like in Harun Farocki's artistic remaking of the Westerbork footage in *Aufschub* (2007, *Respite*). The movie shows us normal people, both Dutch and German, Jews and Nazis, guards and inmates, men and women, old people and

young children, and that unexpected Roma girl, one of 244 Dutch Sinti people deported to Auschwitz, with her last anxious eyes on, as we now know, her favourite dog, Gemmeker's German shepherd. As for me, I found this the most disturbing thing learnt from this almost 'industrial movie', that the worst of all evil might be hidden in normalcy.³

³ E-mail: response from Rob van der Laarse to Athina Gkouma (*Communication and Information Sector MOW/CI 7*), Wednesday 14 December 2016.

Nomination form

International Memory of the World Register

The Westerbork Film [edited May 8, 2017]

ID Code [*Internal use only*]

1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

During spring 1944, Jewish deportee Rudolf Breslauer documented the everyday life in the Westerbork transit camp on film. The function of Westerbork was to assemble Romani and Dutch Jews for transport to Nazi concentration camps. The film was commissioned by the German camp commander Albert Gemmeker. Gemmeker meant to produce a professional film aimed at showing the economic value of the camp.

Breslauer documented the Tuesday train transports to other concentration camps, though most images picture 'moments of normalcy'; healthy men and women working in workshops, playing sports, children at school, or scenes at the hospital, cabaret and even a church service. The *Westerbork Film* was never completed, but much of the raw footage is preserved.

Since 1948, fragments of the film are widely used in documentaries, films and newsreels. Footage of the transports, especially the scene of the Dutch Sinti girl Settela Steinbach who looks at us from behind the doors of a boxcar, became iconic for the systematic extermination programme of the Nazis.

The film is rightly regarded as an irreplaceable, unique and illustrative document of World War II. It shows the only known moving images of daily life in and deportations to Nazi concentration camps. This document ought to be protected and inscribed to the Memory of the World Register.

2.0 Nominator

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

Netherlands Institute for Sound and Vision, Hilversum, The Netherlands

In cooperation with:

- Memorial Center Camp Westerbork, The Netherlands
- NIOD, Institute for War, Holocaust and Genocide Studies

With support of:

- Gedenkstätte Bergen-Belsen, Germany
- KZ-Gedenkstätte Neuengamme, Germany
- The Falstad Centre, Norway
- Kazerne Dossin, Belgium
- Mahn- und Gedenkstätte Ravensbrück, Germany